

BZN Silence Farm Metanoia

Faiths /Traditions Represented: BZN Silence Farm Metanoia does not claim any faith tradition, we invite people of any faith and no faith, and people of various faiths and none are welcome and have been welcomed.

Location of CC: Damme, Belgium

Key Areas of Focus: Spiritual Deepening, Seminars/Workshops, furthermore: Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation, Peace-Building Training, Interfaith Education

Summary:

The BZN Silence Farm Metanoia is a retreat center in Damme, Flanders, Belgium. It is located in very beautiful natural surroundings in the countryside near Brugge. The Silence Farm is open to people of all faiths or none who want to find their path in life and explore their inner side.

The Silence Farm's work is based on the insight that the various crises of today's world - economic, monetary, ecological, refugee and Middle East crisis etc., - are closely connected with an inner crisis, i.e. a widespread focus on the outside world - production and consumption - at the expense of losing one's inner side and inner richness.

Central to the work of the Silence Farm are programs on silence and meditation. These get participants to connect with their inner processes. They are complemented by workshops tackling societal issues, such as divorces, living with a family member with terminal illness, strengthening one's inner life in the light of daily responsibilities, and so on. In other workshops participants are invited to explore the role of faith in today's world and open a space for interreligious and interconvictional exchange and dialogue.

As to what we hear from people in private talks and during group processes, we are making positive contributions to the community by holding a mirror to society. We write articles in the BZN Magazine which is delivered to 207,000 families in Flanders, we give interviews on radio and television, publish our programs, and more to reach as many people as possible.

The Stillness Farm hosts people of various faiths and none. Through exchange between people of various backgrounds a new understanding and new language is found.

CC Profile Questionnaire:

1. What is the current religious/cultural/social context in the area where your CC is working?

In our Belgian context we are related to a very secular society. Society is facing huge challenges and disintegration. This is true for Flanders and Belgium, but also for Western Europe and nowadays many other parts of the world. This crisis comes in various forms: the economic crisis, the monetary crisis, the destruction of the Earth, the refugee crisis, the Middle East crisis, and so on.

But behind all these crisis is an inner crisis. If we do not see that there is a much deeper crisis behind the outside crisis, we will not be able to find solutions.

2. Why is interfaith/intercultural bridge building needed in the area where your CC works?

Bridge building is needed because society is disintegrating. All kinds of structures and institutions are shaking, facing gigantic internal problems. We lack orientation; we do not know where North, South, West, East is. Take the exploitation of the planet: it is a top indication that something is deeply wrong. All our energy is directed towards the outside world, to the world of forms, of material goods and of consumption. And that is in great tension with the inside world. Alienation in people and structures is big, it is huge.

Flanders is one of the richest areas of the World, but it also has a very high rate of suicides and of use of ataractics (psychopharmaka).

While the inner and outer worlds are interconnected, our inner eyes are closed. The spiritual aspect of the outer world is not seen. We just relate ourselves to the production of materials. The richness of the inner life is lost.

The only solution is that we go inward, that we remind ourselves that we have a soul, that we have a spirit. We forgot this. We are only concerned with the outside world: “always more, better, faster.” It comes down to “always more.”

3. Please briefly describe the main activities or programs your CC is carrying out? Please specify the year in which the activity took/is taking place.

Dealing with a very secular society we invite our guests to look beyond the secular world, to look at what is *behind* the material word. We try ‘to seduce’ people to meditate and to go into silence. We are creating an open space for people searching for their paths in life; this could be a spiritual pathway. It does not have to, as not everybody is looking for a spiritual path. We are offering the space for deepening, and we see that this works and people awaken to their inner truths.

Every morning and every evening we offer half an hour of silent meditation.

Every six weeks we offer a week of silence. Participants arrive on Sunday and we offer an introduction on the arrival day. From Monday morning on the days are passed in silence. Meditation is offered three times a day, one hour in the morning and half an hour both at noon and in the evening. On Friday, during the last lunch, we break the silence; and we exchange with each other about what the past week has done with us. And people experience little miracles during the time of silence. To give you one example: a lady of 45 who has been recovering from cancer, had gone through chemotherapy, and the doctor had told her that after the treatment she was cured, but should be prudent. The lady said that this disease of cancer saved her life. She was in a very responsible position in a big company, and madness entered her life, dealing with all the obligations: work, the children, the family. Suddenly, when she received the message that she had cancer, she felt the urgent need to reflect. And she said that she will make different choices.

Generally speaking our experience is that people often do not dare to make changes. There is a deep anxiety in ourselves; we prefer to walk with the main stream, the collective; instead of reflecting on the question of “Who am I and what do I want to do with my life?”

For the meals at the Stillness Farm we offer bio ecological vegetarian food from our own vegetable garden. So we produce our own food including our own potatoes and also sell them to our guests to take them home.

We also support mentally and physically handicapped people to work within the Stillness Farm Metanoia, so that they become visible and have a role to play in society. We want to take them out of the institutions.

Next to the silence weeks we also have other programs and various workshops. We want to avoid the impression that the Stillness Farm is just a nice place in Flanders where stressed people can get some rest. We have a much deeper agenda. We want to have an impact. Therefore we offer workshop dealing with key topics in our society.

For example on November 19, 2015, we invited forty CEOs of forty Flemish companies and multinationals. We presented to them what we can offer them, with the help of three top coaches, to convince people to relate themselves with silence. The coaches also used key information, scientific facts, to convince them of the importance and the effect of silence, as these kind of people request intellectual evidence, and it worked. In 2016 we will offer three follow-up programs: a 3-day-, a 2-day, a 1-day program. We want to create sustainable processes, not one-time shots. Change takes time and needs an experience, not only intellectual knowledge.

The day after tomorrow I will be interviewed on Radio 1 in Flanders. One of the questions they will ask me, is: “What is a question for you for which you do not have an answer.” And I will respond that my question is: “What will be the tipping point in the world where institutions will be collapsing? Will it be ecological? Bank? Monetary? Migration? The Middle East?”

Another programme deals with a different issue. As in Flanders we have a lot of divorces – in Antwerp 60% of the couples get a divorce within the first three years of marriage – we offer a program, a process, about our ability to be in relationship. Last year, in 2015, we sat together with seven men and seven women, who did not know each other, but all of them were divorced, all educated, prepared to reflect. And we conducted in depth-interviews with them, we confronted them and asked them to identify basic keys for making a relationship sustainable. A very rich chemistry happened when we brought all fourteen individuals together. The keys which we identified will be promoted, professionalized and will be rolled out in the second half of 2016. We prioritized these keys. The most important thing was interesting and a surprise for me, it was: give us new stories, new metaphors, new symbols, which can be internalized; so that, when we have a relationship problem, we can be reminded. That is people need stories, new symbols and new metaphors.

A third program involves people who are in a family where one of the family members is terminally ill. We offer them a space as a family where they can listen to other families in the same situation and explore how they can relate to the terminal illness; and how they can continue to work as a family. It is coached by a highly experienced person.

This month, in January 2016, the Stillness Farm is two years old. We can currently host 23 people in 12 rooms for residential stays and we can cater for them. – Up to 35 people can be accommodated in two locations nearby and have their meals at the Stillness Farm. Our own room capacity will be further expanded, too, starting in 2020.

4. Between which specific religions or cultures are bridges being built?

Existing structures, systems and organizations of our society mostly claim a certain ideology or religion, no matter if they are political parties, religious communities or other structures.

At Stiltehoeve Metanoia we give space to anybody, no matter which faith - or none - a person belongs to, and we have hosted people of various faiths and none. Being human unites all of us, and we would like ‘to seduce’ people into discovering that we are spiritual beings and into relating to spirituality.

Behind offering space to religious and non-religious people our question is: How can we, as religious people, relate ourselves to the secular world? In the dialogue between people from secular and religious worlds, a new way of thinking, a more purified way of thinking can arise.

We need to renew our spirituality, because it is a container word: spirituality is also too commercialized. The lie behind commercials is that they try to convince us that in material things we can find life and become happy. (And this is not true.)

5. Please explain the method or strategy that your CC uses to bring together people of different cultures and faiths that generally do not engage or cooperate with each other.

Twice a year we offer a 4-day workshop about the question what faith could be today: Where do we come from? What is the historical background? What went wrong? Where are we now? What could be an answer to renewed spirituality? This workshop was dominated by people who were over 50. The people of these age groups have the most problems with religion, looking back to their childhood. The younger generation mostly does not relate anymore to a religious institution, so they do not have problems with it.

The second 4-day workshop which I offer is “Do we all believe in the same God?” It is more specifically related to interreligious dialogue. As it is important that people are there with an open ear, we start with *their* reality. How did they relate to their religion as a child? How did they change during their lives? It is true that often people respond more positively to spiritual topics than to religion and interfaith. Many people are very suspicious of religions. But beneath the skin they are busy with religions and religious questions. For the workshop we were fully booked, we also had an agnostic with us. He confronted the other participants with some questions – questions they had never heard in their lives. The process among the participants is an educative moment.

At the beginning of the workshop, I give them an introduction and pose some open questions. Topics then surge in the following conversations. I give participants an introduction into Christianity. As an example I then move to Islam, guiding participants to become aware of how strongly they are indoctrinated in their views by the media. Of course, I try to invite them to see the importance of heart-to-heart encounters with people of other faiths.

6. Why do the activities your CC is carrying out improve cooperation among people of different traditions in the broader community?

Our activities improve cooperation among people of different traditions by deepening spirituality, raising awareness and self-exploration and encouraging heart-to-heart encounters.

7. Within your CC, you have members from several different faiths and cultural traditions. How would you describe cooperation among your CC’s members? Have there been any challenges?

Our activities include staff members, volunteers, retreat and workshop participants, Stillness Farm guests and members of the broader society. The cooperation is constructive and positive, we try to care for each other, treat each other with respect and mindfulness.

8. What are some observations or signs you see that relations are improving between people of different faiths/cultures in the area where your CC works?

We realize that our activities allow those involved to deepen their own paths, explore their inner side and search their personal path. This allows participants to be more fully themselves and give of themselves to their relations and society.

To give you an example, a Christian nun who was angry and against everything that was related to Islam shared at the end of our workshop that the whole process changed her view on Muslims and Islam in a very drastic way. She was capable and ready to convince her human environment to look to any other religion in a different way. Other members told me that deepening the historical background and actual reality of Islam helped them to approach the religion in a different way.

9. What does your CC hope to achieve?

We aim to connect people with their spiritual inner side and help them to stand still, reflect and meditate. This, we are convinced, is key if we want to resolve the severe crisis which our world is facing.

10. Aside from funding, what are some specific ways URI can better support your CC in reaching its goals?

We would want URI to help us to spread our experiences and the vision we have.

11. As you know, the Purpose of URI is “to promote enduring, daily interfaith cooperation, to end religiously motivated violence and to create cultures of peace, justice and healing for the Earth and all living beings “. In what ways do you feel your CC’s work helping to achieve this purpose?

Peace, justice and healing is for us very much linked to being true to oneself and to being in relationship. In our work we want to support both inner exploration and truth and strong relationships.

12. What value or benefits does your CC receive from being a member of URI?

Through URI I have met people of many different faiths and we have become friends. On the journey I have broadened and deepened my understanding of other religious paths. I have also become aware that the media image of Muslims is distorted and not capturing the heart of their spirituality, for example.

On another level I have experienced that one’s own vision and path is deepened in dialogue with others. My Christian vision of the gospel has been enriched by Buddhism. And I dare say that, if Rome was willing to change their theological framework, they can only do it with Buddhists, agnostics, and so on. I need to listen to people of other religions and their view of life. They ask questions that I need to cope with. Nobody on this planet has a right to claim the Truth. Those who claim the Truth have no idea about it.

13. What value or benefit does your CC currently provide or could potentially provide the URI network?

The Stillness Farm provides a space which is favorable to reflection and deepening. In September 2015 the URI Europe Regional Support Team – board, trustees and staff – have met at the Stillness Farm. In October 2016 a URI Europe conference will take place here.

Although we are in a financially difficult position as we are still a young initiative, we are offering our social rate for these events, subsidizing the cost.

- 14. Do you communicate or work with other CCs in the URI network? If yes, please share a few examples. If no, please explain why you have been unable/ uninterested to connect with other CCs.**

Yes, we communicate with other CCs in the URI network, most of all the URI Europe CC, which I am a member of, and currently still as chair. I have participated in events of the DMLBonn CC, namely the “Jewish Christian Muslim Summer School” at Ammerdown, UK. Related to the URI Europe work we have been hosted by the AUDIR CC in Barcelona and many others. With other CC members of the Stiltshoeve Metanoia team, we have also participated in the Parliament of the World’s Religions in Barcelona on 2004.

- 15. As a CC that works on improving interfaith relations, perhaps you have seen, heard, or experienced something interesting. Please share a very important personal experience or lesson related to interfaith/intercultural relations that changed impacted your beliefs OR a story about something that happened in your community related to interfaith relations.**

The most important change in my life linked to interreligious dialogue and thanks to URI is that an often unrecognizable outside of someone who is different for me changes into a recognizable inside. I meet my deeper spiritual self in the encounter of the other.